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The Secret Missions of Vernon Walters

How America's Lone Operator Saved Kissinger's Paris Talks

By Benjamin Welles

AIR FORCE ONE was halfway across the Atlantic, en route to Europe, when the first warning signals flashed: hydraulic brake trouble. It was April 3, 1970.

On the presidential jet was Henry A. Kissinger, with two aides, heading for ultra-secret meetings with the North Vietnamese delegation at its dingy hideout in the Paris suburbs. Separate meetings with the Chinese Communists — also safe from prying eyes on the fringes of Paris — were expected to start any day. On these two-track meetings, months in preparation, hung Richard Nixon's hopes of extricating the United States from the Vietnam morass, and on his vehement orders they were being kept secret from the U.S. press, the Congress, the State and Defense Departments, even from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Hour after hour, messages from the crippled jet poured into the White House as the flight engineers struggled in vain to correct the malfunction. With each message, rushed to Nixon in the White House by Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, the tension rose. As time passed, the grim probability loomed that Air Force One might have to be diverted from Bourges, an obscure military airbase in central France where Kissinger was scheduled to disembark secretly, to Frankfurt's Rhine-Main airport, which combined sophisticated electronics, U.S.-installed arresting gear in event of brake failure and a U.S. Air Force unit on the scene.

But Rhine-Main was also one of Europe's busiest airports; even if the great jet were saved, Kissinger's unannounced arrival in Europe almost certainly would be spotted, leading to intense press speculation. The North Vietnamese, suspecting duplicity or — worse — bungling, might well break off the painstaking negotiations on which Nixon's foreign policy hopes rested. Barely controlling his temper, Nixon swung around.

"Tell Walters," he snapped to Haig, "that I want him to touch every base and save this thing no matter how! He's the only man I know who can do it."

IT WAS 8 p.m. in Paris, and Maj. Gen. Vernon A. (Dick) Walters, senior defense attache, was alone in his office. His secretary had left for the day. Since morning, he and she had been coding and decoding the flood of panicky White House messages forecasting that Air Force One might have to be diverted — although no one seemed to know to what field.

Walters sensed that a crisis was building. "I can't possibly cover every airfield in Europe!" he had finally told the agitated Haig. "Tell me as soon as you can where it is finally going to land, and I'll see what I can do."

Then came the grim message: Rhine-Main. Walters sat pondering for a long time. Then he left and hurried through the crowds on the Rue St. Honoré until he reached the Elysee Palace, residence of President Georges Pompidou. Moments later, his credential checked, Walter entered Pompidou's serene office.

Smiling, Pompidou welcomed him and pointed to a chair. They knew each other well, and Walters wasted no time outlining the drama then unfolding as Nixon's jet roared closer to Europe. They had, at most, two hours. Pompidou listened closely, occasionally nodding. He had been made privy to the meetings, despite Nixon's and Kissinger's initial resistance, after Walters had warned that French intelligence surely would get wind of the talks sooner or later and, if unmuzzled, might leak them. Pompidou had kept the secret among a tight group of top diplomatic and intelligence aides, and so far it had held. As Walters finished, Pompidou reached for his private telephone.

An hour and 6 minutes later, Walters was taking off from Villacoublay airport, outside Paris, in Pompidou's private Mystere 20 executive jet. A half hour later they picked up Air Force One circling around Rhine-Main and followed it as it let down cautiously onto the great field, coming miraculously to a safe halt at the far end. Emergency fire crews were already moving in, and the huge craft was bathed in floodlights.